

## Typologies

By Karen Green

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Back in November, I had the incredible privilege of being invited, along with Scott McCloud, to talk to Minnesota Public Radio "Midmorning" host Kerri Miller about "[The evolution of comic books](#)." Miller had been listening to an interview with Art Spiegelman, and was intrigued by his observation that we were currently in a "Gutenberg moment," in which technology would change the way we read and create and disseminate comics. She thought it would be interesting to talk to Scott and me about the changes digital media are wreaking and/or have wrought on the medium of comics and its creators and readers. Is the experience of reading comics enhanced by these digital options?

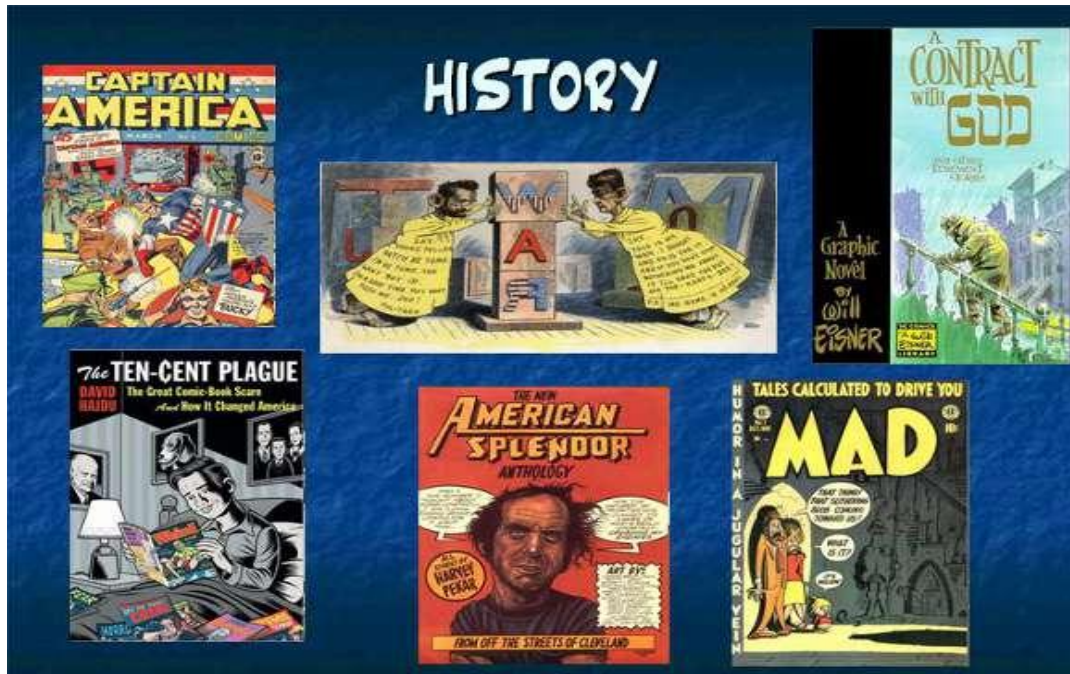
It was a lively—and live—conversation (which was a little nerve-wracking, if I'm honest), and listeners were encouraged to call in and ask us questions. At one point, a St Paul English teacher-in-training called to ask me for examples of using comics as teaching tools and I think I panicked a little. There may have been stammering. But I told him to email me and I would expand on some ways that occurred to me. I actually gave out my email over the air, which didn't turn out to be as tragic a decision as it might have been.

A few hours later I got my email from Jacob, and I started typing furiously. The more I wrote, the more I thought of, until finally a typology—a classification system—began to emerge. As it happened, I was invited to give a talk at Yale that same month, and it was there that I first unveiled that typology (which is where these images come from). I thought perhaps I'd share them here, though, and if any of you can come up with additional categories I hope you'll mention them in the comments.



This is pretty much what I envisioned when I first created the collection, which indicates the limits of my own imagination at the time. I wanted faculty to assign comics the same way they do prose works, to further explore the theme of their course. This was also my approach in the [exhibition](#) I curated a couple of years ago—six of the seven displays were devoted to themes **that** might be featured in a university curriculum, and I offered examples of comics in our collection that explored those subjects.

Some of those examples are here. *Maus* and *Palestine* speak for themselves, really; they were, in fact, two of the three titles that formed our collection before I started buying formally. (The third was *Persepolis*; these were the three that were living in course reserves, because they were featured on required reading lists.) The books in this example tell stories that can be used to talk about the Holocaust, the nature of the crisis in the Middle East, the nature of war, the nature of illness, etc. *Mom's Cancer*, for example, is frequently assigned in courses in our Master's [program in Narrative Medicine](#), as a [literally] graphic example of how sickness affects both the sufferer and those in the sufferer's universe. Reading it and other illness narratives can help health-care workers understand what patients and their loved ones go through and how the workers' own actions can affect people in crisis.

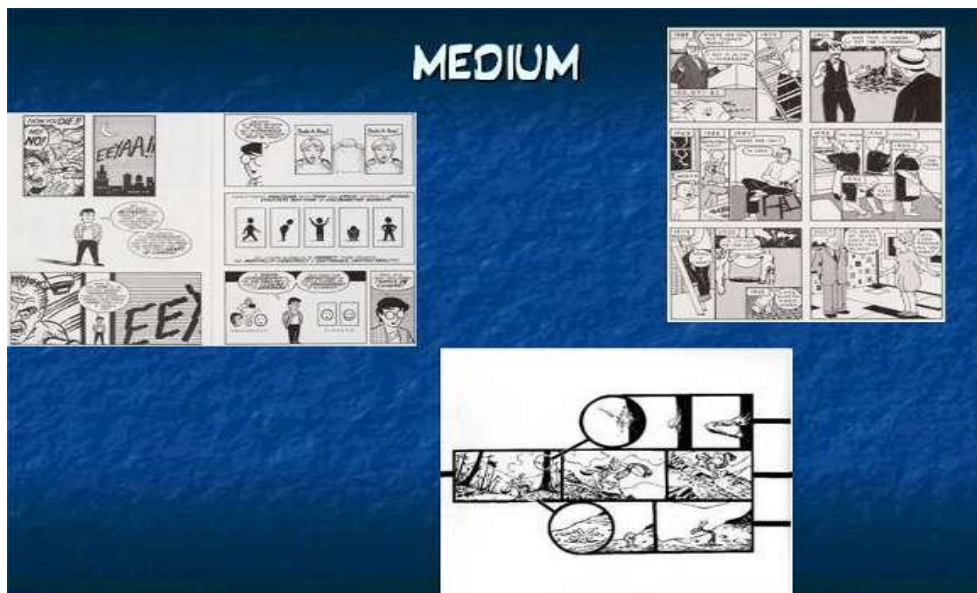


Within this category there are a couple of different aspects: the history of the medium and the medium as history. That *Captain America* cover serves as both, in a way—both an example of a superhero comic from the past and a reflection on how World War II was integrated into popular culture. To give another example, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* wasn't the first autobiographical comic, but it certainly elevated the genre to a level heretofore unseen, and it serves as a perfect vehicle for students to trace the parallel development of the memoir in both graphic and prose works.

By calling *A Contract with God* a "graphic novel"—a term that didn't necessarily have the broadest application in 1978—Will Eisner began the process that allows us to trace the evolution of the phrase in terms of marketing and "respectability." *Mad* magazine, meanwhile, is a huge milestone in both Jewish culture and in the history of satire. I read an interview with Al Jaffee somewhere recently in which he talked about going to "The Daily Show" studio to do a drawing for them, and getting mobbed by the entire crew. "We wouldn't exist without you!" the cast kept saying, referring to the entire Usual Gang of Idiots. And it's true.

That political cartoon of Hearst and Pulitzer dressed as the Yellow Kid can be unpacked in a myriad of ways. It tells the history of early comics, by referring to Hearst's theft of Yellow Kid creator R. F. Outcault from the Pulitzer newspaper empire. It tells the story of the early 20th-century newspaper circulation wars—and, more centrally, the story of these two newspaper moguls' involvement in the [Spanish-American War](#). That's a lot of history for one little rectangle.

David Hajdu's book *The Ten-Cent Plague* is not itself a comic, but it relates the story of the demonization of comics in the 1950s by the double-barrelled attack of Fredrick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. A history of social panic, of government censorship, of a radical change in the types of comics that were created, of the backlash that yielded underground comics...a lot to unpack there, as well.



This is a category that hadn't even occurred to me when I started the collection. Talking with cartoonists and comics studies scholars over the years, however, led me to think about how the medium actually functions. I didn't confess to Scott McCloud in that MPR interview that it had taken me a while to get around to reading *Understanding Comics*, but it's true—it did take me a while. I was really focused on content and history!

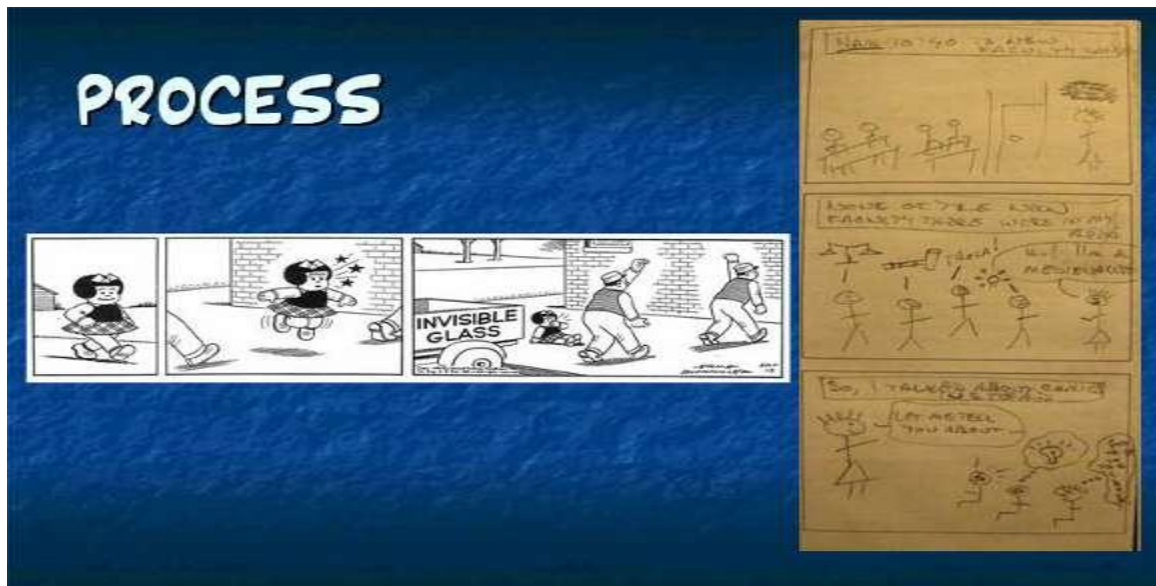
But what I discovered when I read it at last was a methodological vocabulary that I could use to **understand** (oh, see? good title!) what those cartoonists and scholars had been talking about when they talked about how to construct a panel or a page or an entire story. I remember when I first started becoming a film buff as a kid, I didn't think much about the role of the screenwriter or the director. I remember when I first started watching baseball in the '80s not initially understanding the role of the catcher and pitcher in how a player fared at bat. Similarly, I'd never thought about the care that went into laying out panel, page, and story, and the techniques that allow readers almost unconsciously to grasp elements of the story that are not made explicit, or to navigate the panel or page.

So here are examples of works, like McCloud's, that explain how comics function, and also works that challenge the reader/viewer to apply different analytical muscles in order to understand the narrative. In the upper right is a page from Richard McGuire's brilliant 6-page



story "Here," which I've written about at least twice before. On the bottom, an early page from Rebecca Dart's lengthy story "Rabbithead," in *The Best American Comics 2006*, shows how a single row of panels begins to split off into concurrent narratives—which eventually reach seven parallel rows before narrowing back down again to a single line. It's a stylistic tour-de-force.

Wordless comics, too, get students thinking about how a story is told visually, and Peter Kuper, Eric Drooker, and Shaun Tan all offer compelling contemporary examples of this very focused variety of sequential art.



Finally: how do you make your own comic? This was the disconnect I felt most strongly when I spoke to cartoonists who taught: they were primarily teaching the craft, not analyzing or problematizing the content or context. But, [as I described](#) a few years back, I had actually taken part in a create-a-comic exercise once and, while it made very clear that I should keep my day job, it was also a very, um, graphic lesson in the issues described above, in the category of "medium." You don't have to be an aspiring cartoonist to find the process of creating a cartoon fruitful. I've used this exercise with a number of classes since I first encountered it. In trying to understand the process, you can't go wrong with the work Matt Madden and Jessica Abel have been doing here, both in Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story* and in the pair's *Drawing Words, Writing Pictures* (for which they now have an entire [site](#)).

"Nancy" is there, of course, because Ernie Bushmiller is a one-man education in the economical creation of a comic. This was first brought to my attention in a lecture I heard Art Spiegelman give, and it will be hammered further home in a few months, upon the release of Paul Karasik's and Mark Newgarden's loooong-awaited book, [How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels](#). "Nancy" is a handy tutorial in the basic grammar of the medium, and armed

with a few "Nancy" strips as a tutorial I'd wager even a neophyte could turn out something readable.

So, there you have it. My first stab at a typology of comics pedagogy. Does it make sense? Are you teaching or learning about or with comics in a way that falls outside these parameters? Let me know!

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Incidentally, this month's column comes off a little perfunctory, I know. It's a crazy time. I'm involved, with Danny Fingeroth and Columbia professor Jeremy Dauber, in planning a 2-day symposium called "Comic New York" that will bring together creators and scholars to look at the intertwined histories of New York City and the American comics medium. It's going to be a blast—and open to the public!—and I'll have much more about it in next month's column. But, for now, just a tease, while I get back to the heavy lifting...

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